

The Rt Hon Steve Barclay MP, Secretary of State for Health and Social Care
The Rt Hon Mel Stride, Secretary of State for Work and Pensions
Michael Brodie CBE, CEO, NHS Business Services Authority
Cc: Neil O'Brien MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State (Minister for Primary Care and Public Health)

14 December 2022

Subject: Urgent improvements are needed to the Healthy Start Scheme

Dear Secretary of State,

The current cost of living crisis comes on top of a pre-existing poverty crisis in the UK. One in four (25.8%) households with children has experienced food insecurity in September 2022¹, and more financial hardship is predicted as costs rise. The Government's targeted Healthy Start scheme provides a vital nutritional safety net for families facing food insecurity. Yet major issues persist, including the fast diminishing value of scheme payments against rising food prices, and continuing digitisation and data access issues, risking a public health crisis.

Below we set out urgent improvements to the Healthy Start scheme to be addressed as soon as possible:

Increase the value of the payments in line with rising food prices

In April 2021, the Government increased the value of Healthy Start from £3.10 to £4.25. However, the value of payments is not keeping up with high levels of inflation and rising food prices. We are disappointed to see that Healthy Start was not included in the Chancellor's Autumn Statement commitment to raise benefits in line with inflation from April 2023. We see this as a worrying omission in light of rising prices and a reduction in healthy food purchases. October's Food Insecurity Tracker revealed that food insecure people are five times more likely to cut back on purchases of fruit and vegetables (58% and 47.4% of households, respectively) than households who are food secure (12.8% and 7.8% respectively)².

Furthermore, the fast rising costs of essential items such as infant formula require immediate action by the government that cannot wait until next spring. According to analysis by First Steps Nutrition Trust, between August 2021 and November 2022, the cost of infant formula has increased by as much as 23% - more than double the average increase in food prices. The

¹ Food Foundation Household Food Insecurity Tracking September 2022
<https://foodfoundation.org.uk/initiatives/food-insecurity-tracking>

² Food Foundation Household Food Insecurity Tracking September 2022
<https://foodfoundation.org.uk/initiatives/food-insecurity-tracking>

current Healthy Start allowance is now not enough to cover the full cost of any infant formulas on the market.³

We ask DHSC and NHS BSA to:

- Immediately raise Healthy Start allowance in line with inflation
- Thereafter, commit to review the value every six months

Improve communication and data-sharing between DHSC, DWP and local authorities

Until April 2022, the Department of Health and Social Care published monthly data on both eligibility and entitlement per local authority area. Health professionals and local charities tasked with supporting Healthy Start uptake have been relying on this data to shape their community outreach strategies and resource allocation. We were pleased to hear about the commitment to re-start publication of uptake data by the end of 2022. This data is long overdue and local teams are urgently awaiting its publication. Furthermore, the issues caused by the delay in publishing updated uptake data have highlighted that communication between local health professionals and NHS BSA/DHSC ought to be improved.

We ask DHSC, NHS BSA and DWP to:

- Address the data sharing agreements between DWP and NHS BSA without delay to enable the publication of entitlement and eligibility data to restart by end of 2022
- Make this data available per local authority area, backdated from April 2022 onward

Address outstanding digitisation issues

Despite progress in addressing many of the technical issues in the digitisation of Healthy Start, ongoing issues are being reported by frontline healthcare professionals and families. Since our last correspondence, we have received further reports that beneficiaries are experiencing issues with their application or using the card. These issues have been reported directly to NHS BSA, and the high volume of calls to the helpline, averaging around 330,000 a month since April 2022⁴, suggests there are unresolved issues.

We appreciate that DHSC and NHS BSA have agreed to back pay families who were rejected due to the faulty online application system. However, the requirement of proof that their application was rejected is problematic for families who tried to contact the phone line but didn't get through due to long waiting times or were cut off, and those who tried to apply online and received rejection messages on the screen.

We ask DHSC and NHS BSA to:

- Swiftly investigate and resolve any remaining technical errors being reported by health professionals and users

³ First Steps Nutrition Trust (2022), Costs of infant formula, follow-on formula and milks marketed as foods for special medical purposes available over the counter in the UK (report: <https://infantmilkinfo.org/costs/>)

⁴ Answer to written Parliamentary Question by Lord Bishop of Gloucester, 7 November, 2022

- Host regular webinars for health professionals and community groups to update them on action being taken to resolve these issues
- Urgently invest in additional capacity for the Healthy Start helpline and ensure users are well-supported
- Automatically approve back-payments for beneficiaries previously on paper vouchers who are still eligible but may have struggled with the application process

Further outstanding issues we request to be addressed in the medium term:

We are aware there is a lot of work to be done in the short term by DHSC, DWP and NHS BSA to ensure the scheme works well for families that are already eligible, and appreciate your efforts to address this. In the medium term, we ask your department to commit to expanding the scheme to all young families and pregnant people who are experiencing food insecurity:

Expand eligibility and increase uptake from more families in need

The National Food Strategy (NFS) recommended a less restrictive income threshold for eligibility, which is currently only for those with children aged under 4 and with a household income of £408 per month or less excluding benefits. Many low income families are unable to benefit. Furthermore, there are children falling through the gap in support between eligibility to the Healthy Start Scheme and Free School Meals – this can easily be addressed by increasing Healthy Start eligibility to families with children under 5 years old. There is a precedent in Wales where £1 million was included in the Final Budget 2022-2023 to help bridge this gap⁵.

We are encouraged to hear that your department is planning a consultation on access to Healthy Start for families with NRPF and look forward to participating in it. Given that Free School Meals have been permanently extended to all children from NRPF families, we recommend doing the same for Healthy Start.

We are also encouraged that there is now an overall target to reach a 75% uptake. Nevertheless, uptake continues to be low, especially compared to the high uptake of Best Start in Scotland⁶.

In the meantime, a lot more could be done to improve uptake, reinvesting underspend from the scheme due to low uptake in previous years. Much wider promotion of the scheme is needed to reach those who have not yet signed up and remain unaware of the scheme. The NFS recommended the Government launch a £5 million communications campaign to promote the scheme.

We ask DHSC and NHS BSA to:

⁵ Final Budget 2022-23 A Budget to build a stronger, fairer and greener Wales, available online at: <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2022-03/final-budget-2022-2023-note-v1.pdf>

⁶ Uptake across Scotland is 76% according to a recent evaluation of the scheme available on: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/evaluation-best-start-foods/>

- Expand Healthy Start eligibility to all families on Universal Credit and equivalent benefits with children under 5 years old as recommended in the NFS
- Commit to a £5m promotional campaign, as recommended in the NFS, which targets eligible families and the healthcare professionals who work with them.
- Host regular webinars for health professionals and community groups to update them on action being taken and discuss effective ways to improve uptake
- Immediately bring in the promised consultation on the permanent extension of Healthy Start to all families on NRPF

We welcome an opportunity for you to discuss our proposals alongside a group of beneficiaries who can demonstrate the importance of the scheme as well as their experiences of accessing it.

Yours sincerely,

Kath Dalmeny, Chief Executive, Sustain



Anna Taylor, Executive Director, Food Foundation



116 fellow signatories listed on the following pages:

Julia Burrows, Executive Director for Public Health & Communities, Barnsley Council

Becky Reynolds, Director of Public Health and Prevention, Bath and North East Somerset Council

Dr Arif Rajpura, Director of Public Health, Blackpool Council

Jon Hobday, Director of Public Health, Bury Council

Rachel Wigglesworth, Director of Public Health, Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly

Sharon Stoltz, Director of Public Health, City of York Council

Dr Rupert Suckling, Director of Public Health, Doncaster Council

Lucy Wiggman, Director of Wellbeing, Public Health & Communities, Essex County Council

Victoria Eaton, Director of Public Health, Leeds City Council, Association of Directors of Public Health

Sally Cartwright, Director of Public Health, Luton Council

Claire Greszczuk, Deputy Director of Public Health (interim), Newham Council

Wendy Burke, Director of Public Health, North Tyneside Council

Mark Adams, Joint Director of Public Health (Middlesbrough and Redcar & Cleveland)

Iona Lidington, Director of Public Health, Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames

James Lowman, Chief Executive, Association of Convenience Stores

Jonathan Pauling, Chief Executive, Alexandra Rose Charity

Dr Doug Simkiss, Chair, British Association for Community Child Health

Eddie Crouch, Chair, British Dental Association

Clare Murphy, Chief Executive, British Pregnancy Advisory Service

Niall Cooper, Director, Church Action on Poverty

Layla Meerloo, Project Manager (PACT), Citizens UK

Suzy Russell, Coordinator, Community Supported Agriculture Network UK

Chris Askew, Chief Executive, Diabetes UK

Neil Leitch, Chief Executive, Early Years Alliance

Dr Erin Williams, Co-Founder and Director, Feed

Carina Millstone, Executive Director, Feedback Global

Andrew Forsey, National Director, Feeding Britain

Victoria Sibson, Director, First Steps Nutrition Trust

Dan Crossley, Executive Director, Food Ethics Council

Victoria Williams, Director, Food Matters

Dr Matthew Philpott, Executive Director, Health Equalities Group

Kim Roberts, CEO, HENRY

Sabine Goodwin, Coordinator, Independent Food Aid Network

Alison Morton, Executive Director, Institute of Health Visiting

Ros Bragg, Director, Maternity Action

Josephine Namusisi-Riley, Lead, Parents and Communities Together (PACT)

Mena Amnour, Parent Organiser, Parents and Communities Together (PACT)

Gill Walton, Chief Executive, Royal College of Midwives

Dr Camilla Kingdon, President, Royal College of Pediatrics and Children's Health

Stephanie Slater, Founder/CEO, School Food Matters

Rob Percival, Head of Policy (food & health), Soil Association

Leon Ballin, Programme Manager, Sustainable Food Places

Jane Partington, Partnerships Director, The Bread and Butter Thing

Philippa McKeown-Brown, Head of Food Policy and Emerging Markets, The Consumer Council

Lucy Parish, CEO, The Feed

Dr Liz Hind, Local Partnerships and Training Officer, UK Women's Budget Group

Dr Kate Allen, Executive Director, Science and Public Affairs, World Cancer Research Fund

Beth Parry, Partnership Coordinator, Arun & Chichester Food Partnership

Amy Baxter, Senior Public Health Practitioner (Children, Young People and Families team),
Barnsley Council

Cllr Mariam Khan, Cabinet Member for Health and Social Care, Birmingham City Council

Cllr Jackie Floyd, Assistant Executive, Adult Services & Health, Elected Member, BwD North
Primary Care Neighborhood, Blackburn with Darwen Unitary Authority

Lynne Goodacre, Coordinator, Blackburn with Darwen Food Alliance

Nicola Dennison, Senior Public Health Practitioner, Blackpool Council

Shona Okeke, Public Health Strategist, Brent Council

Eva Nembhard, Public Health Apprentice, Brent Council

Helen Starr-Keddle, Project Manager, Brighton & Hove Food Partnership

Cllr Ellie King, Cabinet member for Public Health and Communities, Bristol City Council

Viv Stein, Partnership Coordinator, Buckinghamshire Food Partnership

Aine Douglas, Chair & Coordinator, Calderdale Food Network

Louise Baker, Food Justice Coordinator, Cambridge Sustainable Food

Suzie Laud, Public Health Practitioner, Cornwall Council

Matthew Thomson, Convenor, Sustainable Food Cornwall

Rich Hurst, Food Durham Advisory Board Member

Cllr George Duggins, Leader, Coventry City Council

Val Ayre, Public Health Manager, Cumbria County Council

Charlotte Molyneux, Coordinator, Devon Food Partnership

Caroline Tradewell, Director and Campaign Coordinator, Eastbourne Food Partnership CIC

Caroline Kenyon, Chair, Greater Lincolnshire Food Partnership

Corin Bell, Chair, Good Food Greater Manchester

Revd Ian Rutherford, Chair, Greater Manchester Food Security Action Network

Shree Datta, Communications Officer, Good Food in Greenwich

Rachel Stevenson, Finance Officer, Growing Communities, Hackney

Mathilde Kerr, Health Improvement Officer, Harrow Council

Anna Route, Development Officer, Hull Food Partnership

Cllr Sabah Hamed, Portfolio Holder for Adult Social Care & Health, Kingston upon Thames Council

Dr John Lever, Chair, Kirklees Food Partnership; Reader, Sustainable and Resilient Communities, University of Huddersfield

Cllr Marcia Cameron, Joint-Cabinet Member for Healthier Communities, Lambeth Council
Cllr Ben Kind, Cabinet Member for Children & Young People, Lambeth Council

Paula Cooper, Senior Public Health Practitioner, Health Equity Welfare and Partnerships, Lancashire County Council

Jeni Meadows, Development Worker, Lancaster District Food Justice Partnership

Esther Bissell, Healthy Start Development Worker, Foodwise Leeds

Kathryn Ingold, Consultant in Public Health, Leeds

Eloise Pearson, Senior Pathway Integration Manager, Women's Health & Healthy Adults, Leeds Clinical Commissioning Group

Tracey Simpson-Laing, CEO, Home-Start Leeds

Dr Michelle Morris, Associate Professor in Nutrition and Lifestyle Analytics, University of Leeds

Stef Lake, Chair, Lewes District Food Partnership

Dr Naomi Maynard, Good Food Programme Director, Feeding Liverpool

Edwina Revel, Programme Director, Early Start Nutrition, London

Cllr Tracy Rawlins, Chair, Manchester Food Board

Joe Dunne, Coordinator, Middlesbrough Food Partnership

Ashlee Teakle, Senior Public Health Strategist, London Borough of Newham

Lau Prieto, Public Health Officer - Food Strategy, Newham Council

Anna Clayton, FoodFutures coordinator, North Lancashire

Abdu Mohiddin, Locum Consultant in Public Health, North Northamptonshire Council

Nick Burdekin, North Powys Sustainable Food Co-ordinator, Cultivate (Cwm Harry) Cyfyngedig

Kerry Melville, Coordinator, Nourish Northern Ireland

Fiona Steel, Manager, Good Food Oxfordshire

Ian Smith, Director, Food Plymouth CIC

Selina Treuherz, Partnership Coordinator, ShefFood, Sheffield

Jenny Rouquette, Partnership Lead, Shropshire Good Food Partnership

Sophie Padgett, Coordinator, Shropshire Food Poverty Alliance

Claire Mawson, Senior Public Health Advanced Practitioner and Chair of Heathy Start Group, South Tyneside Council

Chris Price, CEO, Pecan (Southwark Food Partnership)

Akeema Paul, Health Improvement Officer, Southwark Council

Cllr Evelyn Akoto, Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing, Southwark Council

Jo Matwiejczyk, Projects Officer for Community Activities, Pembroke College Settlement

Ariela Cravitz, Rose Voucher Project & Volunteer Coordinator, 1st Place Children & Parents' Centre

Suzanne Betts, Clinical Lead for Public Health Nursing, Sirona Care & Health, Southwest England

Mark Hunter, Leader of the Council, Stockport Council

Susan Riley, Chief Officer, Citizens Advice Tameside

Isabel Hodgkinson, Clinical Director for Primary Care, Tower Hamlets GP Care Group

Katie Palmer, Programme Manager, Food Sense Wales

Ruby Barnett, Food Partnership Coordinator, Wandsworth Food Partnership

Lizzie Gothorp, Project Support Officer, NHS West Yorkshire Integrated Care Board

Sam Watts, Access to Good Food Lead, Winchester Food Partnership

Katie Lockwood, Service Manager, Yorkshire Children's Centre